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Rediscovering our shared qualities in ever-changing situations

Why postsocialist anthropologists should (and do) study rhetoric

Gareth E. Hamilton, Durham University

g.e.hamilton@durham.ac.uk

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Abstract

With the aid of ethnographic examples from Saxony-Anhalt (eastern Germany), this article argues for a rhetoric culture approach to studies of postsocialism within anthropology. Whereas studies of former state socialist societies within the wider academy have been prone to teleological narratives of Western triumphalism and high-level abstraction, anthropologists have provided ethnographic attention to individual experience as a vital counterpart in explaining how individual people react to the ensuing social and economic difficulties. Recognising that developments in the former state socialist countries and the effects on their populations have roots not only in that area and political period, anthropologists have further suggested that our analyses take on an similarly longitudinal and geographically expansive range. Through the examples of, first, employing the once-derided Trabant automobile as a rhetorical tool for selling eastern current German products and, second, using inventive linguistic tropes and visual imagery to persuade fellow citizens to buy and renovate to derelict buildings, rhetoric culture theory is posited as the optimum means of so doing due to its focus on how all humans, using cultural items from multiple domains and periods as a persuasive force, continuously and creatively alter and modify culture. In this light, and using a third example of a heated postsocialist-themed podium debate in Berlin on the moral appropriateness of the phrase ‘verlorene Generation’ (‘lost generation’), it is argued that the particularly close attention to our informants permitted by rhetoric culture matches well the common humanistic sense of concern for others’ wellbeing anthropologists share with their informants, especially in ‘changing’ postsocialist societies.

Keywords

Postsocialism; rhetoric culture theory; Ostalgic; material culture, social change

Introduction

In this article, I set myself a ‘rhetorical’ task. Like all rhetors, my primary goal is to persuade, and in this case I hope to persuade my readership that rhetoric culture represents a useful and appropriate theoretical approach for an anthropological study of a postsocialist topic. In so doing, I hope that it will become clear that this is not simply ‘mere rhetoric’. As rhetoric culture moves rhetoric away from its negative connotations, it will become clear that such an approach is indeed not only beneficial for postsocialist studies. Rather, to reiterate the view expressed by some anthropologists that a conception of culture based in rhetoric, and culture shaped by rhetoric, it too fulfils such a role for the discipline in general. In approaching the prescribed task I will present some of the problematic aspects identified by scholars such as Berdahl (2000b) and Hann (2005) which beset postsocialist studies, and then move on to show how sociality and rhetoric culture can address these deficiencies through its vision of how culture operates at an interactive and rhetorical level. More precisely here, I use Michael Carrithers’ combining of rhetorical culture (as expressed by members of the International Rhetoric Culture Project such as Strecker),¹ with his earlier conceptions of human sociality expressed in, for example, *Why Humans Have Cultures* (1992). In so doing, I will present a brief exposé of the theory, along with examples from my own fieldwork of how cultural rhetoric is visible today at work in postsocialist societies. However, I will also suggest that it is always at play, at all times, not limited by any means to ‘postsocialist societies’, and that this helps to meet some of the suggestions by Berdahl and Hann as to which paths new postsocialist studies should follow. To set the scene, I wish to begin with a case study of very ‘live’ and immediate postsocialist studies as experienced by me, an anthropologist, in eastern Germany: a meeting of postsocialist scholars.

¹ Website at <http://www.rhetoric-culture.org> (accessed May 10, 2010)

The example with which I begin is from a podium discussion organised in Berlin on 27 November 2008 by the Innovationsverbund Ostdeutschlandforschung, a network of researchers in the various social sciences working on, and to a large extent directly in, eastern Germany.² It refers more specifically to the good-natured apology made by keynote discussant Prof. Burkart Lutz in response to criticisms over his use of a short, two-word epithet – ‘lost generation’ (*‘verlorene Generation’*). Prof. Lutz had attributed this description to a generational cohort of young(er) people in eastern Germany whose birth had been encouraged as part of a governmental campaign in the 1960s and 1970s to counteract a falling birth rate. A significant proportion of these people, on entering the job market in the middle of the 1990s had difficulties in finding employment. The reasons were twofold: firstly massive industrial downsizing after German unification, and secondly due to reduced generational turnover in those posts which were occupied. This younger generation were the focus of the title of the event – in translation ‘The “Lost” Generation: Blocked Entries into Employment’, although discussion did broaden to those who were also currently entering the job market and faced similar problems. In terms of presentation, the titular generation were represented on a graph, a combination of a bar chart and a line graph. And it was this image of a ‘lost’ generation – whether this or the current – which seemed to provoke most discussion by members of the audience who thought it an overstatement. Further, one woman gave a particularly intense and genuinely emotional statement that it was not morally appropriate to label young people ‘lost’. For her, to label anyone ‘lost’ was to banish them to some form of hopeless despondency. And indeed, the wave of relative emotion is what moved Lutz to offer his apology. He noted that he neither wished to offend, nor that anyone should feel personally affected. Rather, he had intentionally used the image in order to provoke debate, to attract attention to the problem in face of what he felt to be societal indifference.

It might seem on first reading that the situation which I have described is quite commonplace: a disagreement over the appropriateness of a description, one applied to

² Website at <http://www.ostdeutschlandforschung.net> (accessed May 10, 2010). The name means ‘network for innovation in east German research’.

other people. It might also seem quite normal that someone feels the need to apologise if they think (or that someone else thinks) they have crossed some line of acceptable behaviour, especially by talking badly of others. What relevance does this have to postsocialist studies, apart from the fact that the debate focussed on events in a postsocialist society? I would suggest that it is firstly this very commonality of experience and secondly our and others' concern for the feelings and wellbeing of our fellow men and women where the essence of rhetoric culture's benefits for anthropologists, postsocialist or otherwise, lies. To understand why this is the case, it is important to consider what situation within postsocialist anthropology has arisen which necessitates a rhetoric cultural approach, as indeed it is to have an overview of rhetoric culture theory itself. I will now offer a brief exposition of both, beginning firstly with postsocialist studies. For reasons of brevity, I shall focus partly on the criticisms of postsocialist scholarship as pointed out by Berdahl (2000b), and then move on to consider some of the solutions pointed out by her, and by Chris Hann (2006; 2007).

Postsocialist studies – criticism and solutions?

Works which deal with postsocialist topics are produced by scholars from a multitude of disciplines, not only socio-cultural anthropology. For instance, these even include 'transitology', the specialised study of the movement from state socialism to Western liberal capitalist democracy. Anthropologists who themselves engage with such themes have readily, and with justification, pointed out some of the problematic aspects which such works very often exhibit. As mentioned above, I will base my summary of these on Berdahl's own account of the fact that she has conducted fieldwork in the area which once formed the German Democratic Republic. Having thus produced works of postsocialist ethnography herself (1999; 2000a; 2000b; 2002), her criticisms hold particular weight here, although there is no shortage of similarly-themed critiques from other anthropologists working in other countries (Verdery 1996; Barsegian 2000; Hann, Humphrey and Verdery 2002). The first of Berdahl's criticisms is that these non-anthropological studies have tended to focus on wider metanarratives, the 'grand transitions', ignoring or seeing as problematic individual, personal stories. So while Maier, whose historical account of the

‘end of east Germany’ is otherwise positively regarded by Berdahl, describes his interviews with former GDR citizens as having ‘presented a particular hazard’ because some interviewees ‘recalled their past socialist commitment with incisive self-criticism, some with unabashed attachment, others with disorientation’ (1997:xvi–xvii), the anthropologist would correctly see this as a rich source of data. Secondly, it is not uncommon to encounter these larger metanarratives ‘in a discourse of capitalist “triumphalism” which entails a certain, linear, teleological thinking in relation to the direction of change: from socialism or dictatorship to liberal democracy, from plan to market economy’ (Berdahl 2000b:1). These, it is argued correctly, seem too simplistic given actual events, alongside their ideological dimension. Berdahl sees anthropology as a solution to these issues with its ethnographic research methods and the close attention to the daily life and views of those studied providing a counterpart to imprecise, one-sided metanarratives. As anthropologists, it would be difficult to argue against such a meritorious view. And in Berdahl’s view, the benefits are mutual: if anthropology is necessary for a thorough study of a postsocialist topic, then it is also complementarily the case that

‘postsocialist transitions offer opportunities to explore some of the central issues of [anthropology]: the relationship among economic systems, political entities, and culture; the construction of identity, ethnicity and nationalism; social and cultural change’. (1999:11)

Given the above criticisms of other ‘triumphalist’ disciplines, it would be ironic indeed if anthropologists were themselves to triumphantly and unquestioningly present themselves and their methods as the saviours of postsocialist studies without considering their utility. To avoid such accusations, I now wish to assess whether current anthropological methods and theory are themselves adequate for the lofty task as set by Berdahl. The final of the ‘central issues’ common to both anthropology and postsocialist studies as noted in the citation above (social and cultural change) is one that she often invokes as something which anthropology can explain. However, given Durkheimian organic and change-resistant models of society, or the historical reluctance (or in certain cases, hostility) of either American cultural anthropology (cf. Benedict 1935) or British structural-functionalist social anthropology (cf. Radcliffe-Browne and Forde 1950) to deal with such change it may seem

somewhat incongruous. Even modern concepts popular within the discipline such as Giddens's structuration theory, or Bourdieu's *habitus* somewhat privilege cultural stasis (Ahearn 2001:117–118). Despite this, the experience of postsocialist societies – among innumerable other situations – proves that change does occur, and as Wolf (1982) for example demonstrates, cultures are affected by other cultures in this constant process of change throughout time, and 'time' has been with us for a long time, and marches ever onwards. And in such contexts, where should the barriers for our considerations lie for a postsocialist study? From 1989, the year of revolutions? Or much earlier? And indeed, where should the geographical boundaries of such analyses lie? Hann (2006, 2007) proffers two significant solutions, ways forward indeed, for postsocialist anthropological studies faced with such temporal and spatial questions, to which my consideration now turns.

The first of these suggestions is that anthropologists should focus on different historical horizons, as 'commemoration of past events is constantly shaping our understanding of the present' (Hann 2007:5). The including as far back as the Neolithic, quite clearly very much before the end, or indeed the beginning, of the socialist era (Hann 2006:256). The second is to focus on Eurasia as the geographic and cultural context for postsocialist studies, given that the influences on postsocialist societies results from, and reflects upon, this broader landmass in a cultural, geographical and, indeed, historical sense. They should 'not content themselves with a "presentist" perspective' (Hann 2007:7) and in so doing take insights from historians, and even work along with practitioners of *Volkskunde*, or folkloric studies. Hann describes this potentially exciting mixture of disciplines, temporalities and spaces as a 'creative consortium of distinctive clusters of scholars' (2007:59). Whether one agrees with the precise membership of this new collegial constellation,³ in the current academic climate interdisciplinarity is heavily and justifiably encouraged due to its potential productivity. In any case the examples below will show that persons living in eastern Germany do themselves use images from the past, and from multiple domains, in their daily lives and I suggest that this historical focus is very justified. Knowledge of the

³ Indeed, the replies to Hann's article suggest that not all are in total agreement, and, for example, with Skalník seemingly talking from bitter experience in the Czech Republic.

sources of the things connoted is unquestionably enhanced by experience in *Germanistik*, German Studies, or History, for example, whether one might share knowledge from the disciplines themselves or their members.

Despite the validity of keeping an historical perspective, is also important to remember that we are anthropologists, however, who have wisely stepped down from our verandah. And while Hann also argues that ‘good ethnography forms only one part of social anthropology’ (2007:2), he notes correctly that his call for a focus on ‘multiple temporalities’ should remain allied to our field experiences and ethnographic writing, where Berdahl indeed argues our strengths are most exhibited. So, to précis and merge the requirements suggested by Berdahl and Hann, a theoretical or analytical framework which can adequately describe and analyse societal change, longitudinally and historically, within a large area with cultural linkages is required, which we as anthropologists may use for our analyses. I would suggest that into this breach can step sociality and rhetorical culture. Below, I demonstrate how with its inherent sense of ‘historicity’ (Carrithers 2007) of our ever mutable social life, it allows the methodological benefits of ethnography to be reaped in times of change, be it at the whole or intersocietal or intercultural level, or at the micropolitical level, or indeed, at the level where one may affect the other. Or indeed, among postsocialist social scientists themselves dealing analytically with those things, as the seminar in Berlin where Prof. Lutz tried to effect positive change himself.

Sociality and rhetoric culture

It is very possible that the mere mention of the word ‘rhetoric’ may have an alarming effect upon the reader or listener, given contemporary meanings which highlight its negative connotations. Deirdre McCloskey, an economist who has written on the rhetoricity of economic theory, notes that, for example, ‘it is used by newspapers as a synonym for the many words in English which sneer at speech: ornament, frill, hot air, advertising, slickness, deception, fraud’ (1998:5). Whether malevolent such as Belial in *Paradise Lost* (Fish 1995:203–204) or simply idiotic such as Janotus de Bragmardo in *Gargantua* (Rabelais 1955:76–81), it is certainly not unknown for the rhetor, that is, the person who produces

rhetoric, to be seen in a less than positive light. However, in rhetoric culture theory, a more neutral position is taken, while the fundamental tenet of rhetoric as a persuasive force based on the Classical idea that ‘just as rhetoric is founded in culture, culture is founded in rhetoric’ is not ignored (Strecker et al. 2003). In the rhetorical cultural constellation, it is also necessary to consider the conception of human sociality onto which it is slotted by Carrithers (cf. *Why Humans Have Cultures* [1992]). Whereas Hann calls for the entry of ‘History’ into our social analyses, in Carrithers’ particular vision of human sociality, ‘historicity’ is attributed to culture. This is a more complex vision, akin to ‘the eventfulness of things, to the fact that things keep going on, relentlessly, whatever the plans we lay or the devices we invent to forestall events’ (2008:162) and results from the human evolved ability to mould and adapt complex social schemes, which he refers to as our species’ highly developed propensity for ‘sociality’. This longitudinal dimension represented by ‘historicity’ seems in the first instance to meet Hann’s call for an historically-imbued dimension to an anthropological postsocialist study. As shall be seen below, the analytical tools it provides indeed further this view. However, the concept has a much broader and deeper and multidimensional potential. Carrithers formulated his original concept of ‘sociality’ in answer to a question he posed to himself: ‘Given the diversity of human forms of life, what must be true of humans in general?’ (1992:4). And it is this spirit of wider applicability which takes its usefulness, and that of its combination with rhetoric culture theory, much further than Hann’s Eurasian focus, and arguably even before the Neolithic. Using sociality and rhetorical culture it is possible to chart how themes and rhetorical arguments from different (cultural, temporal) domains get taken up and modified and reused at different times, places and contexts – whether postsocialist or not. However, it is the ability to deal analytically with change and transition, as well as continuity, which benefits postsocialist scholars most – and the key is how we as humans interact in our daily ‘social’ lives.

In creating the variety of cultural forms we witness, and managing the events which occur every day, we as humans evidently form complex relationships. Further, to manage these effectively we as social actors must understand others’ actions and intentions (Carrithers 1992:55–60). The ‘intersubjectivity’ required to engage within the intricate web of

interactions we face is attained through the evolved cognitive ability ‘to generate long connected skeins of actions and reactions’ and ‘to comprehend such complexity through narrative thought’ (Carrithers 2005b:577). It is rhetoric which is the moving force in these interactions, which people use to get (or in any case attempt) to ‘get things done’. The interactivity involved requires us to hold a conception of culture seen as ever moving and metamorphic, changed by such rhetorical action as is required. And such movement is in no short supply, and the postsocialist period has provided an extra large dose. In order to introduce a schema of how the theory works, let us consider the podium discussion in Berlin as an example of how it might function in a certain ‘situation’. Carrithers defines such a situation as a ‘result of some episode of historicity’, some happening of varying size or formality or proximity ‘to which we must respond’ (2008:162–163). When we are first presented with such a situation it is likely to be in state of ‘inchoacy’, where the situation at that juncture represents the ‘unformed, the uncategorized, the so-far chaotic’, the ‘continually threatening uncertainty, obscurity, and danger’. It is thus a state where something can, might, or will happen, or indeed might well not (Carrithers 2005a:442). If a rhetorical action is made, however, a ‘performance’ occurs. This is the culmination of the process of ‘*mak[ing] a movement*’, in the sense suggested by Fernandez (1986), ‘toward sense and policy, toward an interpretation of the situation and toward a plan’ to resolve the situation (Carrithers 2005a:442). In other words, an *attempt* is made to understand or move events onwards. However, it should be noted that unlike the original term as coined by Austin (1975), ‘performance’ does not guarantee successful action, but refers generally to the attempt (that is, the act) to persuade (Carrithers 2005b:578). Let us move on to consider how this relates to the Berlin situation, and how the movement was made.

If we imagine the situational scene on the podium in Berlin, Lutz represents the rhetor who attempts to bring movement to performance from the state of initial inchoacy of a lost generation faced by both suffering and societal indifference thereto. Confronted with a situation this rhetor develops a plan, firstly choosing the appropriate ‘contrivances of culture plucked from a common store’ (Carrithers 2005a:442) of resources which can be called ‘cultural items’. These chosen, to render the movement intersubjective and thus liable to be understood and actioned by others, a single or combination of rhetorical tools

is chosen. Tools available might include eloquence as in Classical rhetoric, yet this is not necessarily required, and depends on the situation. Whether the rhetoric is ultimately effective depends on the choices the rhetor has made in regard to *kairos*, here meaning the timeliness and appropriateness with reference to the situation which is underway. This could be envisaged as the appropriateness of combination of cultural items with rhetorical tools. Eloquence, combined with elaborate language, might indeed be appropriate to certain circumstances, but equally ‘bald’ (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987: 94ff.) language might be what is required. If the requirement for eloquence can be left to one side along with ‘ornament’ and ‘frill’ and ‘hot air’, there are two other rhetorical tools which have been the subject of focus within the sphere of sociality and rhetoric culture. These are the metaphor, and the story seed.

Thinking of the first rhetorical tool, the metaphor might be understood as ‘the use of ideas and images from a sphere of experience which is more or less understood and taken for granted to grasp and organize for the mind’s eye another, more problematic sphere’ (Carrithers 2005a:442). Alternatively, Fernandez’s definition – ‘a strategic predication upon an inchoate pronoun (an I, a you, a we, a they) which makes a movement and leads to a performance’ (1986:8) – focuses attention on its performative dimension. The second rhetorical tool follows on from this second definition of metaphor, and adapts it into the more narrative ‘story seed’. Here, a ‘story’ can be envisaged as the ‘strategic insertion of inchoate pronouns in an inchoate situation into a story line which makes a move and leads to a performance’ (Carrithers 2007:4.1). Following from this, story seeds could be defined as compact narratives, perhaps even of one word, potentially very potent in comparison to their size. Although not necessarily so tiny, they can represent in their most potent form ‘minute seeds of story which, in a way directly analogous to the condensed, affecting, effective work of metaphor, unfold to make a movement and lead to a performance’ (ibid.:4.5). Below, I will show how these rhetorical tools can be witnessed in use in postsocialist eastern Germany. However, Prof. Lutz has been left in the state of having his rhetoric prepared, but without having made his performance. He, like all rhetors, needs an audience, and some means of presenting the rhetoric thereto. This might occur via the medium of speech; it might be visual in the form of a picture or diagram or

photograph, it might be textual. Lutz used a multi-medial form, combining speech and a graphical representation which visually plots the worsening situation. And adding the publicity material for the event into consideration, there was also a further textual element through which the rhetorical effect can be transmitted. Here, Lutz's immediate audience was a predominately a group of postsocialist scholars. However, the membership of the audience to which rhetoric in general is presented can vary immensely in scale. It is quite possible and likely the rhetor themselves is perfectly able to be the sole or one of the targets for their own rhetoric. When others are involved, this might range from the one-to-one conversation to the group of persons innumerable and individually unknown to the rhetor, such as a public rally or the public formed by the readership of a magazine or internet site, or a television or radio audience.

After having provided a sketch of how a rhetorical movement is made with some reference to the event in Berlin, it is time for some further analysis of the rhetorical items and tools which Prof. Lutz employed. These are sophisticated and complex. Firstly there was the graph, which in itself is a visual narrative, showing decline. In a sense, it also represents a metaphoric and symbolic description of what is actually occurring, and naturally it was chosen for its rhetorical potential. It also, following from the closeness of the complementary definitions of metaphors and story seeds, has some narrative rhetorical potential as a story seed due to the time-based x-axis. Secondly, there was the further story seed of the 'lost generation'. This represents so many connotations of despondency and decline among so many people – in no more than two whole words, including one of merely four letters. Further, generations, I would suggest, have their place in an ongoing continuum which also places them within the context of their predecessors and successors which intensifies the narrative effect. Thus, in terms of *kairos*, can the rhetoric be seen as effective? It might be said without hesitation that it was, in terms of moving the audience, causing debate to widen and attention to be drawn to the issue, as Lutz so desired. Conversely, it might also be argued that the choice of rhetoric was perhaps less than ideal, causing some perceived upset which required a form of apology to be made. Although at this point I do not wish to argue for either viewpoint, I would suggest that what can be witnessed here is especially interesting in the context of postsocialist scholarship, on

account of the audience reaction, the reactions of postsocialist scholars. And while we can regard them as a group of postsocialist scholars, they are nonetheless simultaneously human beings. Thus if all humans are indeed capable of intersubjective understanding as expressed above, then it must also be the case that, as humans, the audience here possesses this capability, as would postsocialist anthropologists as a subgroup. And as a member of that subgroup, I wish to briefly focus on my intersubjective experiences of the event.

In terms of my own understanding that evening in Berlin, in this case as an ethnographer of social scientists, I was – as a hopefully adequate intersubjective being – able to tell that people were not completely in agreement with the narrative presented. I could understand the point made by the audience member who felt that the story seed of the ‘lost generation’ was too extreme. I did not, however, expect the need for an apology from Lutz as rhetoric. So why was this? In a sense, I could understand some of the potency of the rhetoric, and specifically the story seed. However, I was at that point not able to detect the full strength of the effect, partly due to my then relative ignorance of the cultural items which were being called upon. However, afterwards, an ‘informant’, in this case a native German speaking social scientist, who was not present, on my recounting of events was able to provide me with the necessary knowledge of the cultural items involved (In this case, debates over research on the identification of generations during the GDR and in the postsocialist period; cf. Lindner [2003] or Ahbe and Gries [2006] for examples).

Here, scientific knowledge can belong to the store of ‘cultural items’ too, known to persons in our discipline. As an anthropologist as ethnographer and academic it was necessary to learn about them to provide the context for myself. The gap in my familiarity with the cultural items affected my understanding on multiple levels and in multiple domains. Yet, as a human from outside this contextual community, I could interpret the situation to a significant extent and this is due to the ‘true of humans in general’ point I alluded to earlier. There are certain ‘cultural items’ involved in this postsocialist event which seemed to have a most ‘general’ quality to them in terms of their intersubjectivity, understandability and powerfulness. Below, I will suggest that this is the key as to why sociality and rhetoric culture is the optimum theoretical standpoint for ethnographers of

postsocialism. In so doing, I will present examples from my fieldwork in postsocialist eastern Germany where we see rhetoric in use outside by persons outside the academic sphere.



Fig. 3.1
Quality newly rediscovered

Quality newly (and unexpectedly) rediscovered

On 4 and 5 April 2008 an event named ‘*Ostschlager*’ was held in the town in which I conducted my fieldwork, Halle an der Saale, in eastern Germany. On one hand this seemingly multi-purpose event was cast as a family day out with GDR overtones, where among other entertainments provided, GDR-era artists (the titular ‘*Ostschlager*’) would sing songs on a stage on the market square, and one could drive a Trabant, the famous (popularly infamous?) GDR-produced car. Despite this fun element, the day was to all intents and purposes a well-organised sales event organised by the local city marketing

organisation. To choose a cultural item being used in a way which I had not expected, I wish to concentrate on one of the aforementioned entertainments, the Trabant. This vehicle, known affectionately as the *Trabi* or perhaps less affectionately as the *Rennpappe* (racing cardboard) due to its flimsy bodywork (Berdahl 2000a:131), is often the butt of jokes regarding its quality. Given that one of these is that one can double its value by filling its tank with petrol (ibid.:135; cf. August 1999:64–65), I was surprised to some extent to see an image of the vehicle (or more precisely a synecdochical rear bumper – see Fig. 3.1) used as a background to the slogan on the merchandising material for the temporary eastern product section in the relatively high-end, centrally-located Galeria Kaufhof department store. The tag line was ‘*Ostgut – Qualität neu entdeckt*’, which might be translated as ‘eastern merchandise – quality rediscovered’ or perhaps even as ‘newly discovered’. Further, a yellow original Trabant had been placed among the shelves (Fig. 3.2)



Fig. 3.2
Yellow Trabant among the eastern products

On the occasions I visited this shop both during this period, and in September when it returned, it was normally very busy and shopping baskets were quite fully laden. Further, families, friends and even complete strangers commented, discussed and told stories about products, very fondly indeed, at times expressing surprise at seeing something again after many years.⁴ Assuming that the products on offer (e.g. chocolate, snacks, toiletries, household utensils among others) were indeed of the high quality claimed, the juxtaposition of these with the car of a much lesser perceived quality might appear unexpected. However, it suggests, as part of the phenomenon of *Ostalgie*, where people are nostalgic for the eastern past, and no less for the product, that there is less of a conceptual incompatibility than predicted. A further automotive example of this at the event concerned was the placing by a local Škoda garage placed of its newly-produced, and high quality since the company's purchase by Volkswagen, vehicles on show alongside an admittedly high-value and well maintained classic model. (Fig. 3.3)



Fig 3.3
Yellow Škoda among much newer models

⁴ I witnessed one day the tasting of products of a brand of resurrected GDR-era biscuits, and I have never seen people get so overjoyed over a piece of confectionery. People discussed the objects, they even discussed where they worked and when they used to eat them. These biscuits, like the other products, seemed to have a biography (Kopytoff 1986).

Could it be said that this event was something one-off? Further experience suggests that these examples are not alone. For example, expanding Halle-based Halloren, the company which operates Germany's oldest chocolate factory and makers of the still-beloved (as conversations with many eastern Germans testify) GDR-era Halloren-Kugeln confectionery, stations a Trabant painted in its colours, with logo thereupon, outside its factory visitor centre (Fig. 3.4).⁵ Another company in the same sector places a picture of a Trabant on some of its bars (Fig. 3.5).



Figs. 3.4 and 3.5

Halloren Trabant; Trabant on chocolate bar

And indeed, other GDR-era products which have either survived or been resurrected, use other contemporary images in similar ways.⁶ The unexpected case of the Trabant shows why this might be so. Whereas Berdahl suggests a motivation based on symbolic resistance against Western dominance (which is most certainly part of the reason), I focus here on a sociality-based interpretation. In these terms it could be argued that there is a latent interpersonal dimension to this selling, and to the affection for the products. Indeed,

⁵ It was also used, seemingly with official permission, alongside naked female models, in a 2008 naked ('erotic') calendar, as well as locations within the Halloren factory, and those belonging to other companies!

⁶ Among many other products which one could choose from, Gries (2004) offers an analysis of how, to great affect (and thus gaining public affection) Club Cola, the socialist era Berlin cola drink employed images from GDR propaganda, placed in a new context, in their advertising after the product was relaunched.

Berdahl (2000a) notes how people had strong attachments to their vehicles due to their rarity and related difficulty and waiting lists to obtain or even repair them. She talks of a ‘special word’ used by former GDR citizens to describe their relationships to the vehicle: ‘*hasslieben*’ - a mixture of loving and hating, which sounds far from a connection bereft of emotion!

Further, Berdahl notes that the Trabant affected and facilitated other social relations, meaning special attention given to the repairman, or parties on their arrival after up to fifteen years on a waiting list, for example (2000a:132–133). In other words, on their own and as part of a broader network of relations, it seems that the vehicles had an interesting and varied social life (cf. Appadurai 1986), almost as ‘consociates’ or ‘*Mitmenschen*’, those ‘who experience their own duration and whose consciousness flows similarly to [ours]’ (Schutz 1982:32; cf. Carrithers 2008:166ff.). These Trabis, and the products they are used to sell, are consociates who accompany us through life’s ups and downs. Such examples show that items of culture can take on new meaning, or new significance as the case may be, as time passes and as they are employed in acts of rhetoric, which in these cases were for the purposes of selling. It can further be seen how by examining rhetorical usage how that alteration in meaning occurs, and also how metanarratives can be challenged by actual usage in individual places and by individual people or organisations.

Living houses amidst the shrinking

I wish to move to a second theme which will provide a more visual example of rhetoric, and highlight a particular problem facing the region in which Halle is located. This is the process of ‘shrinking’, a story seed which is quite powerful in itself. Sociologist Wolfgang Engler notes that it is a process which affects all domains of life and society: ‘population, towns, factories, people in their social dimension – everything is shrinking’ (*‘Bevölkerung, Städte, Fabriken, Menschen in ihrem sozialen Format – alles schrumpft’*). (2004:102). The *Bundesland* of Saxony-Anhalt is particularly badly affected by shrinking in the first of these domains, namely its population, and to such an extent that is described by Kröhnert *et al.* in their Berlin-Institut report on population in Germany as the ‘*Land der Leere*’ (‘the land of

emptiness') (2006:110). In Halle, as people move, partly in the '*große Treck gen Westen*' ('great trek into the west')⁷ (Kröhnert et al. 2006:44) in search of work, homes are vacated and no-one is found to refill them. Recently, indeed, it was noted that in terms of the largest one hundred German settlements Halle has the third largest percentage stock of empty homes (11.1%), and Saxony-Anhalt the highest percentage of all the *Bundesländer* (9.4%).⁸ This is noticeable on the ground as buildings are knocked down or others lie empty, in need of renovation, awaiting new residents. In one street, Ludwig-Wucherer-Straße, which marks the border of what is regarded as the high-rent residential Paulus district, there are many of these buildings, and some feature 'advertising' to encourage investors to purchase them. Two examples stand out.



Fig. 3.6
Provocative advertising

The first (Fig. 3.6) is fantastically eye-catching, and at first-glance contains a arguably provocative 'cultural item', a reference to the world's most current famous terrorist Osama Bin Laden. However, on further reading, this turns out to be the phrase '*ich BIN ein leerer LADEN [...]*' ('I AM an empty SHOP [...])' with the necessary words highlighted. And indeed, people notice this somewhat bald but nonetheless eye-catching rhetoric where

⁷ These are further examples of great story seeds, but perhaps not so fantastic if one is affected by them.

⁸ The source for this is a study by energy company Techem and the empirica market research institute in Bonn. It must be noted however, that the situation is improving. The figure for Saxony-Anhalt has sunk from 12.9% in 2001. However, I wonder if the large-scale demolition of empty blocks of flats has anything to do with this improvement (cf. http://www.techem.de/Deutsch/Presse/Pressemeldungen/Produkte_und_Verbraucherinfos/Leerstandsindex/index.phtml, accessed May 10, 2010).

domains are jarringly juxtaposed – it was described in the local press as Halle’s most famous empty building. (‘Laden erlebt Auferstehung’, *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung*, 17 June 2008, p. 12) It must be noted, however, that in terms of finding a buyer, in the period I was in Halle at least, it was unsuccessful.



Fig. 3.7
House as narrative

A second building from the same street provides another inventive, yet ultimately (commercially) unsuccessful example. As can be seen from Fig. 3.7, there are two forms of ‘advertising’ on the edifice. The first, in the centre, is a standard-type panel which provides potential buyers with the contact details they require. However, the other form of

‘advertising’ displayed is a rich piece of visual narrative rhetoric, and arguably simultaneously a piece of public art. The panels attached to the front of the building show depictions of various windows with interior decorations (mostly curtains and blinds) which suggest a state of being occupied. This is concurrently a forward and backward-looking narrative in the sense that it shows what once might have been, and further what might once again be if only someone took action. Further, the house acts as a metaphor, representing the image of the perfect occupied house, imposed upon an otherwise bleak scene. The slight incongruity of the locations of panels as regards to the actual locations of windows adds to the attention-grabbing effect. A movement is made, a performance, to attempt to get something done – as well as improving the aesthetics of the built environment.



Fig. 3.8
Naumburg an der Saale

A further interesting example is provided by empty buildings, however this time in the town of Naumburg an der Saale, south of Halle. As in the examples from Halle, this takes the form of ‘advertising’ on buildings, as can be seen in Figs. 3.9–3.11. The buildings displayed are around the Topfmarkt, which is located just off the main market square

displayed in Fig. 8.⁹ As part of a campaign by the municipal authorities to encourage dilapidated buildings to be bought by private investors, displayed thereupon are red coloured banners displaying the slogans (in German) ‘This house wants to live!’ or ‘Me too!’ (*Dieses Haus will LEBEN!*, *Ich auch!*).¹⁰ Although the colour red has been shown to engender increased success in those who wear it (Hill and Barton 2005), it is the use of pronouns in this situation where the potential for successful persuasion lies. If we consider the ‘persons’ in these situations it might be suggested that they are incongruous – it is clear that a house can neither want to live, nor can another cry out in agreement! Yet, this is the crux of the rhetorical effect.



Fig. 3.9
House which wants to live

⁹ The Topfinmarkt is quickly reached by taking the street in the middle of Fig. 3.8.

¹⁰ There are fifteen properties in total which have been identified by the authorities for sale. See <http://www.naumburg.de/wirtschaft/web/de/stadtsanierung.html> (accessed May 10, 2010) for further details and a complete list.



Fig. 3.10
Another house desirous to live

Here, we see that those who created the rhetoric have cast these inanimate objects as our consociates using various linguistic tropes. Firstly we see what might be called ‘pronominal play’ within the these mini-narrative story seeds, which as will be remembered from above involve the ‘strategic insertion of inchoate pronouns’ into these tiny stories. (Carrithers 2007:4.1) This happens in both instances. In the first (Fig. 3.9) we are presented with an action, a verb (‘to live’), which is not usually one carried out by ‘a house’ – houses do not live. Secondly, it is most uncommon for a house to call itself ‘I’ as in Fig. 3.10, or indeed to call itself anything. These unconventional persons, by dint of them being attention-grabbing unconventionally-constructed persons, doing unexpected things, invite us to get involved in their consocial narrative. Further, the content of the narrative itself is

compelling. Although the buildings are in a difficult situation, they propose and indeed crave a positive future. We are expected to – as per the Carritherean conception of sociality – intersubjectively imagine their needs and wants as if they were one of us, and hopefully feel moved enough by the movement in this performance.



Fig. 3.11
The rest of the street also wants to live

Common humanity, postsocialism and anthropology (a conclusion)

Wanting to live, as the houses do, seems a fairly basic human desire, one that might be even be described as near-universal. The brochures which the authorities produce for the individual properties, after restating that the house wishes to live, display the following text:

Thus we are searching for potential interested buyers who are prepared, with a great passion for detail, to once again fill this property with LIFE. The opportunity is given to successfully combine living and working in an attractive and central location.¹¹

Alongside the further basic human desire to give life, to nurture, here we witness such desires connected to shelter, another basic requirement for wellbeing. This is in turn connected to the desire to live and work in a pleasant environment, which might also been seen as conducive to human happiness. And to think of the problems which face postsocialist societies, whereas the eastern Germans after the end of the socialist regime experienced widespread change, the experience of rapid social transformation brought about by political and economic developments is not one which only they have faced. At times in Halle, as a human, I feel the need to compare the situation there to my own home town in Northern Ireland, and I can detect similarities – not only because of a certain level of change, but that we all, from wherever we hail, share the same basic desires and needs which we would not deny others. One of the emblems of the International Rhetoric Culture Project is the Hamar *woko* stick, which is used rhetorically to beckon the good, and push away the bad, metaphorically as well as in practical ways (Carrithers 2005b:577–578).

Whereas there might be some societal or cultural differences between the Hamar or the Northern Irish or the eastern Germans as between any societies, as humans we share the needs mentioned above, plus the propensity for intersubjectivity and the use of at times mundane, at times inventive, rhetoric. Indeed, I think this is one of the key points where

¹¹ Original: 'Daher suchen wir Kauf-Interessenten, die bereit sind, dieses Objekt mit viel Liebe zum Detail wieder mit LEBEN zu füllen. Hier bietet sich die Gelegenheit, in attraktiver und zentraler Lage Wohnen und Arbeiten erfolgreich zu kombinieren' (cf. http://www.naumburg.de/wirtschaft/pdf/de/DSK_Objekte/Topfmarkt%2011/DSK-Topfmarkt-11.pdf, accessed May 10, 2010).

sociality and rhetoric culture can be seen as a benefit for postsocialist anthropology. Just as the examples of rhetoric above mostly came from postsocialist eastern Germany, I have witnessed in the Haus der Geschichte der BRD (a national museum for politics and popular culture) in Bonn people look at displays of old products from the pre-1990 Federal Republic with the same longing, with the same utterances (e.g. ‘look, it’s our food processor!’) as witnessed in the department store in Halle. Yet, this sense of broader commonality goes further than (n)ostalgia. In my experience as an academic and ethnographer I have seen examples from such wide diverging sources as German medieval texts to Carinthian travel companies all using cultural items as rhetoric in interesting ways to persuade.¹² And for anthropologists, we find rich cultural seams to these dialogues, with suitability of the use of cultural items very much linked to the sense of *kairos*. Mention the linking of ‘rediscovered quality’ to a western German, as I did, and the reaction located somewhere between derision and amusement shows it is rather less effective on a western German audience – and thus interesting for anthropological study.

Further, the focus on change is particularly beneficial. This might not be world-shaking change, but sociality and rhetoric culture allows for all levels of change, and interactions between those levels, and the effects at all levels, to be studied in the same methodological way. It does not favour the large narratives, and allows for the micro-narrative, the micropolitics of life, to be studied on the same basis as the ‘big story’. In this way, I would suggest the theory gives more than adequate chance to, as Berdahl set as one of the goals of postsocialist studies, ‘explore how extralocal economic, political and social processes intersect with the individual lives of people in a community’ (2000b:5). It is this which returns my attention to the podium debate in Berlin. In some ways it is quite a good example of how different levels of narratives become intertwined. Whereas as academics it might be possible to stand back at the mention of a ‘lost generation’, the member of the audience – and I am unaware who that person was and what they envisaged their role to be – who most starkly criticised this story seed could not, and I would suggest they were quite correct. This does not mean in any sense that by default Prof. Lutz was incorrect. Rather,

¹² In the second case, the act of putting your ticket into the cancellation machine was recast as a ‘daily plebiscite’, which seemed odd to me at first, but which has a deep cultural resonance in Carinthia!

both he, the audience members, those people who try their best to use various innovative advertising techniques to render those things which were lost or felt to be lost – population, residents, a sense of well-being brought about by losing familiar products or possessions – recovered or rediscovered. Following from this, it shows how we as anthropologists are involved in a discipline which deals with life as it is lived today. This does not only occur in libraries, but on the streets, so to speak. In postsocialist studies it might be argued that there are a great deal of situations when the social scientist comes across events and situations and narratives which are very close to people's hearts, as well as their own. We need only think of Berdahl's heavily-laden list above for a sense of the many domains which people feel strongly about. Thinking, then, of Hann's conception of Eurasia and the geographic and historical linkages which he highlights, the anthropologist has a good chance of having been affected in some way by the events which were 'pre' to the current postsocialism. And we live in a world where the metanarratives of capitalist triumph that we might castigate in a scholarly sense are still current in many domains, not least politics and government.¹³ Living in this world of metanarratives, I think sociality and rhetoric culture provides a means of analysis of these narratives. Yet it focuses on the interaction of the meta with the micro, by allowing us to analyse how narratives at different levels, how cultural items come together and replicate and metamorphose by allowing us to trace the development of narratives, of the trails of cultural items, of inferences and interactions from far and wide both temporally and geographically. This might sound complex, and indeed Carrithers notes 'for ethnographers, [it] sets a high standard of achievement' in that merely describing structures is not sufficient, but we are required 'to go beyond that to their skilled use in one situation or another' (Carrithers 2005b:582). I would also suggest that our knowledge of many domains has to be wide to meet this challenge, just as it would be within the context of studying Eurasia as suggested by Hann. However, in this complex environment in which we study and also live, it is rather necessary.

¹³ If one were to follow internet discussion on the comments sections of newspaper website of the row of Russian gas supplies to Europe in January 2009, statements like the US had 'won' the Cold War were not few. Even President Obama's inauguration speech reminded us that 'that earlier generations faced down fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks'. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/obama_inauguration/7840646.stm, accessed May 10, 2010).

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